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**RURAL DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIES OF DINAMIZACION IN THE AREA
OF IVARS DE NOGUERA-BOIX (LLEIDA).**

Thematic area: Regional and Urban economy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Santa Anna reservoir, on the river Noguera Ribagorçana, lies between the provinces of Osca and Lleida. Its waterbasin includes the municipalities of de Òs de Balaguer and Ivars de Noguera in the Noguera region of the province of Lleida, and those of Estopiñan del Castillo, Camporrells, Baldellou and Castillonroy in the Llitera region of the province of Osca.

As a consequence of the construction of the reservoir, the villages of d'Alberola, Boix i Tragó de Noguera were expropriated. The present situation, with the disappearance of the villages of Boix and Tragó de Noguera, with the municipalities being attached to Ivars de Noguera and Òs de Balaguer respectively, together with the practical disappearance of cultivation, the former use of part of the land of Tragó as an army firing range and the low human presence, produce a general sensation that the area has been abandoned.

Currently, the Town Hall of Ivars de Noguera has decided that it is necessary to carry out a study with the aim of creating growth in the area of Boix and the Santa Anna reservoir. The Diputació de Lleida [local government] has taken responsibility for funding the study.

The study¹ has been carried out by the Departament d'Administració d'Empreses i Gestió Econòmica dels Recursos Naturals (AEGERN) – the Department of Business Administration and Financial Management of Natural Resources – of the University of Lleida, within the framework of a European Union Training Programme, and with the help of members of the Confederació Hidrogràfica de l'Ebre (CHE) – the Hydrographic

¹ Ruiz, Manuel (Ed): "Estudi estratègic de bases per a la dinamització i el desenvolupament d'Ivars de Noguera. Àrea de Boix." Universitat de Lleida, 2000.

Confederation of the Ebro – the Town Hall of Ivars de Noguera and the Diputació de Lleida.

The prerequisites established for carrying out action were:

- That the University of Lleida should carry out a strategic foundation study and present proposals for action to bring growth and development to the Boix area, through consensus with the different social and economic agents involved.
- That the actions to be carried out on lands belonging to the Confederació Hidrogràfica de l'Ebre should be areas affected by processes of voluntary expropriation.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is the development of the potential natural and human resources of the Boix area (Ivars de Noguera), identifying courses of action that could be taken with the collaboration of agreement of all the social and economic agents in the area.

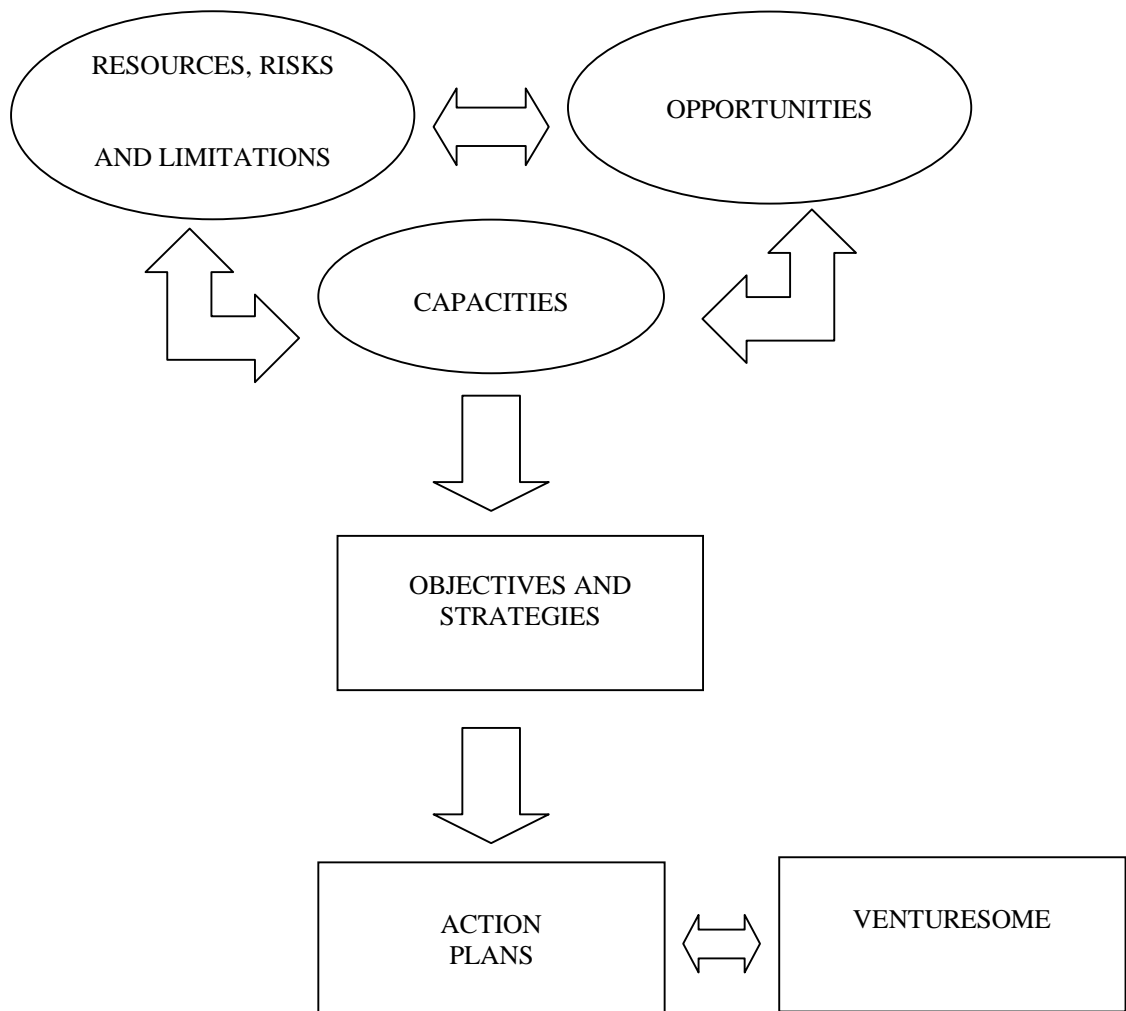
In particular, the aims are:

- A descriptive analysis of the region, the area of influence and the zone which is the object of the study.
- The identification of the area's existing resources.
- The diagnosis of the present situation: determination of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT).
- The determination of strategies that will permit the revitalisation of the local economy.
- The definition of plans of action.
- The identification of entrepreneurs and business initiatives in the area.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology to be used is based on a participative approach to what is possible, one that will generate a climate of collaboration between the different institutions and protagonists, local, public and private, which will lead to plans of action within a framework of agreed strategy.

Gràfic 1. Methodology to be used in the study



4. PHASES OF THE STUDY

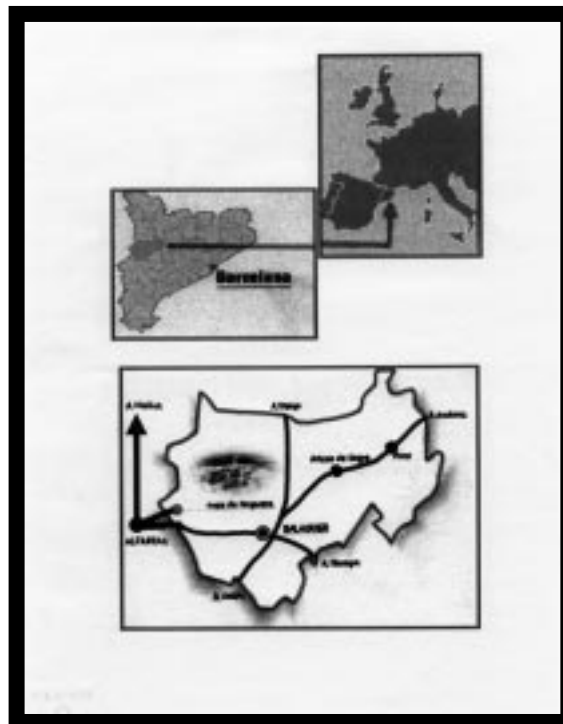
4.1 Description of the area of study

Ivars de Noguera is in the Noguera region. It is near the Santa Anna reservoir, beside the river Noguera Ribagorçana which forms the border between Catalonia and Aragon.

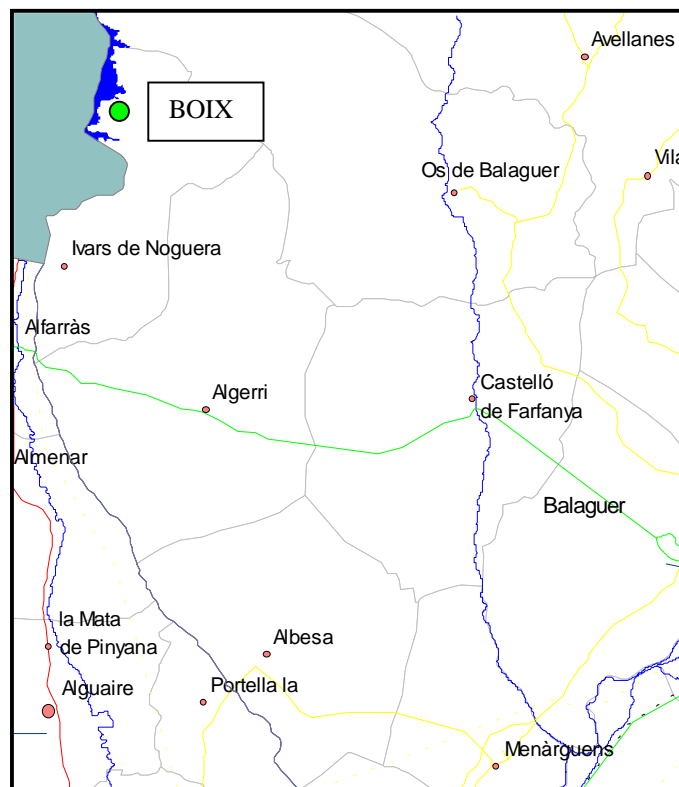
8 km to the north of Ivars de Noguera is the old village of **Boix**. At present it belongs to the municipality of Ivars and since the voluntary expropriation of its lands no one lives there. It is above the Noguera Ribagorçana where part of its lands have been cut off by the Santa Anna reservoir. At present it is a ruined village with the Romanesque parish church of Sant Julià.

Map 1 shows the location of the municipality of Ivars de Noguera and Map 2 shows the area of Boix within the municipal area of Ivars de Noguera, its principal access routes and its situation with regard to the reservoir.

Map 1. Localization of Ivars de Noguera



Map 2. Localization of Boix



The village of Ivars de Noguera, on the access route to the Boix area, is 2 km from the N-240, which links Lleida to the Val d'Aran. At present, the access road to the centre of Boix is an unasphalted track, 8 km in length.

4.2 Data on the municipality

The population of Ivars de Noguera has seen a tendency to decline throughout the last century, with certain periods of stability, of decline and of slight recovery. This fact has produced a fall in the population in absolute terms and a decline in the importance of the municipality within the region as a whole.

From this data, it can be seen that there has been a process of ageing of the population. This is one of the characteristics of rural areas. This ageing is due to low birth rate, the constant fall in population and migration towards urban areas.

Unemployment rates recorded between 1996 and 1997 show that, in general, the smallest municipalities, as is the case of Ivars de Noguera, rural in nature and with a high proportion of the population employed in the primary sector, have low unemployment rates.

In Ivars de Noguera agriculture is the leading sector, as is true for the rest of the region. Agricultural land is mainly dry farmed. Irrigation is to be found in the bottom of the water courses: there are orchards producing fruit, vegetables and other garden produce, which are watered from the Ivars irrigation channel. The fields produce cereals, although there is an importance presence of almond and olive trees. A small amount of vine is also cultivated.

As for the presence of industry, a great deficiency of businesses of any kind can be observed, since only one enterprise of basic industry is to be found.

The tertiary sector is not particularly well developed in the municipality. Being a village with a low number of inhabitants, there are no specialised shops, and nor have larger commercial concerns been developed. There is the typical village shop selling principally food. There are therefore small retail outlets.

The municipality has a certain lack of municipal infrastructure: drains, provision of water, public lighting, refuse collection, etc, a situation worsened by the fact that it is a municipality with a low population, which means there is a lack of sufficient municipal funding.

5. SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY AREA

From the analysis carried out in and around Ivars de Noguera, bearing in mind the aim of developing the Boix area, the following strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities have been detected:

STRENGTHS:

1. Area of the Santa Anna and Boix reservoir
2. Quality autochthonous produce: peaches
3. Good communications
4. Proximity to Lleida
5. Diverse natural resources
6. Forestry tracks leading to different springs, cabins...
7. An excellent area for hunting and fishing

WEAKNESSES:

1. Difficulties of accessing Boix
2. Deficiencies of municipal infrastructure
3. Ageing population
4. Non existence of industry
5. Little infrastructure for tourism
6. Lack of permanent medical attention, and lack of a chemist's

THREATS:

1. Competition from other areas of similar characteristics
2. Uncontrolled development in the area
3. Lack of entrepreneurial initiatives
4. High risk of natural erosion and the difficulties of the natural regeneration of Penya Roja, Matamala and La Creu de Boix. It is an area badly affected by forest fires
5. Emigration of the population to larger towns
6. The progressive abandonment of agricultural labour

OPPORTUNITIES:

1. People that like enjoying nature
2. An attractive area for schools

3. The creation of the services necessary for the older population of the municipality and its surroundings
4. Young people participating in sports
5. The attractions for hunting and fishing associations
6. The growth in the demand for craft and natural products
7. The search for quiet areas for tourism (leisure spaces)

6. STRATEGIES

The principal objectives for the growth and development of the Boix area (Ivars de Noguera) are the revitalisation of the local economy of the Ivars de Noguera district and the creation of jobs, taking sustainable advantage of the resources of the area.

In the area, as in others of similar characteristics, it is necessary to carry out actions intended to increase the profitability of agricultural exploitation through modernisation of the same, increased productivity, a greater use of the added value of its products, activities of rural tourism that provide for enjoyment of open, natural spaces that can be developed in the area, all of which is intended to increase and complement the agricultural income of small family farms and, in general, the income of the inhabitants of the municipality, taking special advantage of the resources and potential of the area, linking to the opportunities that present themselves.

However, to increase the likelihood of success, it is necessary for this development to be carried out in such a way as to be sustainable, that is to say that it should seek maintenance and improvement of productivity and of sustainable resources over the long term.

Tourists seek, and will do so increasingly in the future, greater respect for the environment. As a result, attaining provision of sustainable rural tourism is not only a challenge but also an opportunity.

The present situation of the area having been analysed and the opportunities and threats defined, 4 strategies for the growth of the Ivars de Noguera and Boix area have been identified:

- Rural tourism strategy
 - Agribusiness strategy
 - Crafts strategy
 - Social strategy
- **Rural tourism strategy:** This involves taking advantage of the area for tourism in a fashion that will be respectful of the environment and be compatible with sustainable development. In this rural area, the richness and uniqueness of the surroundings is an element which gives rise to competitive advantages in comparison with other more badly affected areas. This provides scope for a series of activities that the Boix area can offer, both on land and on water. These activities need to be consolidated through regulation of what the Ivars de Noguera and Boix has on offer for the tourist, so that generally the different activities are organised in such a way as to preserve the environment, favour its use and improve the natural resources.
 - **Agribusiness strategy:** Agriculture is the principal economic activity of the municipality. Specialisation in peach growing is important, but there are certain restrictions such as the limited number of commercial outlets, the lack of basic infrastructure as well as that required to organise and manage production, besides the absence of profitable use of surpluses. These elements compose, clearly, an initiative to be taken up in this sector.
 - **Crafts strategy:** The increasing demand for this kind of product provides an opportunity to establish craft activities in the municipality, albeit on a small scale, using the resources of the area, to hand-make different natural products. This strategy will create synergies between the reality of the area and the tourism strategy.
 - **Social strategy:** The age structure of the population reveals the high degree of ageing of the population both of Ivars de Noguera and also of the region as a whole. In this respect it is vital to promote the creation of infrastructure and installations

appropriate to the characteristics and necessities of this sector of the population of Ivars and its surroundings, where the opportunity has been detected.

7. PLANS OF ACTION

Each of the strategic approaches defined comprises a series of concrete, viable actions in the short and medium term.

Naturally, not all the courses of action need necessarily be taken at the same time. It would be advisable to prioritise and plan them according to the degree of their temporal viability, either because they involve agents that are not only local, or because they require the prior existence of certain basic infrastructure or because they require a minimum volume of activity.

Without doubt the combination of these activities would lead to others which would help reinforce the development plan and which would go along with other private and public initiatives that would progressively join the process of growth.

7.1 Rural tourism strategy

Tourism, in this strategy, is an activity which is totally identified with the environment. It needs it not just to support any activity but also as the place where the activity occurs. For that reason, the environment and its representation, that is to say the landscape, are considered by both the experts and by the visitors themselves as the main tourist resource.

Natural spaces and their environment are increasingly becoming leisure spaces. An increase in the influx of tourists has been detected, concentrated particularly during holiday periods, with the rural environment as their destination. In this way, we are witnessing the development of a new trend in tourism which has been called “Nature Tourism” by some authors. For that reason, the development strategy will focus on ecological or natural tourism: eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism is seen as a useful means of conserving natural areas and of guaranteeing a sustainable economy, since to maintain it considerable sums of money are required, spending which in most cases tends to come from the public sector.

The present possibilities of socio-economic development for the Boix area depend on eco-tourism, bearing in mind the natural interest of the area and its potential for recreation, sports and culture around the area of the reservoir.

In the case of the present study, this strategy could be presented in three aspects:

- Accommodation:
 - Nature Centre and Holiday Camp
 - Campsite
 - Farmhouses/Hotel
 - Restaurants
- Activities:
 - Water-based activities
 - Land-based activities
 - Hunting and fishing
- Other services

The positive effects predicted for this strategy are:

- Growth of income to help sustain and conserve the natural area. Income that will go back into the local community (with the improvement of local infrastructure...), with the direct creation of jobs and a climate favourable to the creation of related businesses.
- The revaluing of the natural areas and their environment, new socio-economic and historical values... The local community itself will become conscious of the value of their own surroundings, as much so as the visitor, introducing a consciousness of conservation.

It is necessary to bear in mind the fact that there is a bi-directional relationship between tourist activities and the environment. The unplanned growth of tourist activities tends to lead to degradation of the environment with the consequent loss of income for the sector. On the other hand, investment in improvements of an environmental nature are an important factor in building a demand for quality and contribute towards establishing competitive advantage.

7.2 Agribusiness strategy

Agribusiness is the sum of activities that range from those of primary production to processing and selling different food products. The agribusiness system has acquired great importance in recent years, due to the internationalisation of commerce and particularly of farm and food products, new technology and new forms of retailing.

It is important to bear in mind the idea that, for rural development, the principal activity generating financial resources, one which is fundamental to carrying out policies of development and environmental protection, is agriculture, that is to say the primary sector. It is also important to highlight the fact that the CAP aims to integrate objectives of production, environment and rural development. This being the case, the farmer is not just a producer but also conserves the environment. This focus is one that is promising for the future, since it addresses the problems of the rural world in an integral fashion. In the reform of the CAP, these issues are grouped under what have been called accompanying measures, as yet poorly defined from the financial and operative points of view.

The basis of production of the Ivars de Noguera municipality is agriculture. Although this sector is in serious crisis, it is important to establish the measures necessary to ensure that those aspects that could enjoy a degree of viability are maintained. The agriculture sector must continue to be of decisive importance in the economy of the municipality, but with a form of agriculture that has been adapted to the demands of a competitive market, one fully integrated into a diverse agribusiness economy.

In order to achieve this a series of actions have to be carried out:

- The creation of a co-operative to deal with the processing, diversification and sale of agricultural produce.
- The promotion of the cultivation of medicinal plants, their processing and subsequent sale.

The positive effects expected of this strategy are:

- The diversification of the agrarian structure of the area, which could be carried out by the farmers themselves, increasing their income, or through the introduction of young new people into the rural world.
- A rise in the added value of the products.

Increasingly, sales and industrial processing are the agricultural activities that absorb the largest part of the added value generated in the productive itinerary from agricultural production to consumption of the produce. A fundamental objective of the municipality of Ivars de Noguera has to be that of retaining as much of the added value as possible, by making use of the right commercial channels, in which local co-operatives must play an important role.

Ivars de Noguera concentrates basically on the cultivation of fruit trees, the cultivation of peaches to be more precise, something with a long tradition in the municipality. There is already a market for peaches from Ivars de Noguera since it is already sold under the Name of Origin “Préssec de Pinyana”, but these are sales through large wholesalers rather than direct sales. Considering that it is quality produce that generates the most added value and has the highest expectations for the future (the Name of Origin is a sign of quality), the direct sale of local produce could be promoted, especially peaches, to end users (specialised shops, consumers, etc.).

The introduction of agribusiness activities already means a significant diversification of the production base, but it would also be advisable to introduce new crops to the municipality as far as is possible.

7.3 Crafts strategy

Craft products are those characterised by being typical, local quality products. Crafted food produce includes those products generally made by farmers from raw materials from their own harvests, using traditional artisan procedures of production.

The link between such production and agrarian activity and with a particular form of agriculture – that of the family farm – should be highlighted. The socio-economic importance that this activity can have for the municipality is very high, since Ivars de Noguera is an eminently agricultural municipality, one where the majority of the active population is involved in the primary sector. This form of agriculture is basically one of small family farms, where there is a predominance of medium-sized farms.

In recent years there have been great changes in consumers' habits and tastes, with changes in their conduct as regards food products with more importance being given to quality and less to price. On the other hand, there is growing interest in so-called "typical", local quality produce, which has given new life to traditional quality products, associated with a particular region.

As a result, the strategy chosen is based on the production of craft products, as opposed to what is involved in the production of industrial products. It would therefore be interesting to create:

- An Ivars de Noguera farm shop, which would be responsible for direct sales of the typical, natural products of the municipality.

This farm shop could sell two clearly defined, separate products:

- Food produce
- Complements

The positive effects expected of this strategy are:

- A revaluing of local resources.
- The consolidation of family farms, since it would mean additional income for the farmer and a contribution to the maintenance of the environment.

Although this would be small-scale artisan produce in terms of the volume produced at first, it has a certain singularity since it would revitalise the resources of the area and would contribute to the maintenance of the environment and landscape since, given the conditions involved, it comprises an activity that is essentially respectful of the environment. An appreciable contribution to the family income of the farmers of the municipality of Ivars de Noguera can also be supposed.

7.4 Social strategy

Low birth rate and the loss of population over recent years, due to the process of migration to more urbanised areas, mean that Ivars de Noguera has a population structure of advanced age.

This is a characteristic of municipalities like Ivars de Noguera, which are characterised by their rural nature and low population. In general, the Noguera region is also submerged in a process of ageing and loss of population, something which characterises the regions of the interior of Catalonia.

It is therefore necessary to foment a strategy appropriate to the characteristics and necessities of the permanent population (considering its ageing index, etc.). This fact leads to the elaboration of a social strategy that can address the needs of a very important part of the population of the municipality: its senior citizens:

- The creation of an old people's home and day centre.

The positive effects expected of this strategy are:

- Broadening knowledge of the municipality among the families of the senior citizens, particularly during the visits that they make and which comprise a source of promotion for the area.
- Improving the quality of life, both of the senior citizens of the municipality and the former inhabitants of Boix, as well as others from nearby areas.

The needs of senior citizens for social centres is increasing great. Senior citizens have changed their preferences and seek centres situated in quiet areas, at a distance from large towns, where they can have more direct contact with people in the area.

Ivars de Noguera has these characteristics, which makes the municipality interesting for the establishment of a centre of this kind. A small municipality, of 340 inhabitants, it is only 32 km from Lleida. Strategically situated some 250 metres to the left of the river Noguera Ribagorçana, it provides a magnificent panorama.

There are various forms of social centres, but in this case it would be interesting to create a centre which was an old people's home (for those senior citizens wishing to stay there temporarily or on a permanent basis) and at the same time a day centre (for those people only wishing to come to the centre to spend the day).

This strategy would enable the quality of life of many of the inhabitants of Ivars de Noguera to be improved, and would even attract new inhabitants, albeit not in significant numbers.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study forms part of a very extensive project carried out by Departament d'Administració d'Empreses i Gestió Econòmica dels Recursos Naturals (AEGERN), of the University of Lleida, one which has amply fulfilled its objectives.

On the one hand, diagnosis of the situation was made, a benchmarking analysis carried out and the most feasible opportunities for the Ivars de Noguera-Boix area detected. Subsequently, the objectives and most applicable strategies were determined through consensus with the interested and affected parties, in order to carry out plans of action which have to allow the strategies established to be carried out.

Different entrepreneurs in the area were contacted in order to involve them in carrying out the plans of action. This has allowed a course on the writing of Business Plans to be successful, with 12 entrepreneurs participating.

Allow the development of these actions is expected to take place in the long term, at the present time there is a wish to go ahead with the creation of a campsite, a restaurant and a shop selling natural products.

It should be highlighted that although most of the investment is public, the investment in infrastructure that has to be made in the area by the corresponding public institutions are of vital importance, in order for the activities to develop successfully.

In this case, work on the network of forestry tracks between Ivars de Noguera and Boix is projected, since they are the means of communication between the work proposed in Boix and Ivars de Noguera.

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